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ABSTRACT

One of three related documents exploring the problems inherent to current high school forensic coaching, this paper argues that the present role of high school debate coaches falls short of the educational objectives of forensics. The paper discusses two coaching philosophies--the first being that of coaches who narrowly define their educational role, teach only debate format case types and negative strategies, and then leave debaters to their own devices; the second that of coaches who subordinate their teaching responsibilities to more expedient means of achieving success, i.e., hiring college students as research assistants, and using case handbooks. The paper then argues that a coach has a responsibility to play an active role in the students' development of evidence and arguments because as an educator, the coach is ultimately responsible for bringing out the possibilities in the students. Finally, the paper explores the features that characterize the debate coach's true educational task: distinguishing between novice and advanced debaters and tailoring the coaching accordingly, developing evidence and arguments for the debaters, and providing feedback. (HTH)

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Developing High School Debaters Evidence, Arguments, and the Coach

The word coach is somewhat problematic in the world of
 high school debate. One dictionary¹ only recognizes the word
 coach in the sense of "a person who trains athletes or athle-
 tic teams" or "a private tutor employed to prepare a student
 for an examination."² Another identifies coach as "one who
 instructs or trains a team of performers." Indeed, in the
 seventies a segment of the forensics community supported the

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,
 1973, p. 254

² The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1974, p. 146

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abolition of coach as a term used to describe the person directing a forensics program. Yet, the word coach is still the most commonly used term in high school forensics, and its retention is a reflection of the fact that in most high school programs, the coach singlehandedly develops the educational content of the debate program with little outside supervision or guidance.

The debate coach is the person who must recruit, teach, counsel, encourage, discipline, and defend the debaters and the debate program. Within this range of responsibilities, the need to teach can many times be lost. On the one hand, some coaches so narrowly define their educational role that their debaters seem to be exiled to a life of learning by trial and error. Coaches adhering to this philosophy, for a variety of reasons, seem to believe that once they have taught their debaters such things as debate format, case types, and negative strategies, their role as coach is complete. They seem to believe that the give-and-take of debate rounds, and the ballots that are thus produced, will serve to develop the students' ability to distinguish good evidence from bad evidence and good arguments from bad. Further, they might contend that choice of evidence and arguments is uniquely the responsibility of the students and that the coach who attempts to affect these risks becoming the debater rather than maintaining a role as coach. Yet, I shall argue that this approach does not fulfill the educational role of the coach.

At the opposite extreme, another coaching philosophy must also be noted. The internally, or externally, produced pres-

sure to have students succeed has far too frequently subordinated some coaches' responsibility to teach to more expedient means of attaining success. Thus, some programs have been successful, not because the debaters produced by that program have been well coached (instructed), but because the debate coach has taken some expedient route to success that may have shortcircuited the education that students might gain from debate. Some of the expediencies (which may be more or less educationally defensible) that come to mind include the hiring of college students as research assistants, the purchase of handbooks containing cases and briefs written by college debaters, and manipulation of judges during a tournament. Of course the activity that might be most relevant to this paper is the issue of how much the coach should do in researching and/or writing arguments for his/her debaters. This group of coaches would find little fault in researching evidence and/or composing arguments which would then simply be handed to the student.

However, I intend to distinguish between the coach who researches evidence and writes arguments for the student and the coach who sees a legitimate educational role in developing evidence and arguments for the student. This distinction derives from the meaning of develop. The word develop denotes³ "to bring out the possibilities of," and the coach, like the math teacher, is clearly the one responsible for bringing out

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Ibid., p. 202

the possibilities within the students' efforts. Thus, the coach who researches evidence and composes arguments for his students does little to bring out the possibilities in the student because the students learn nothing about the process by which good evidence is discovered or by which sound arguments are invented. Likewise, the coach who studiously avoids taking a part in developing evidence and arguments for the student fails to fulfill an important educational role because the student is deprived of the structured guidance that allows him/her to master the process of finding good evidence and of creating sound arguments. Thus, I believe that a coach does have a responsibility to play an active role in the students' development of evidence and arguments because the coach, as an educator, is the one ultimately responsible for bringing out the possibilities in the students.

The debate coach's educational task is not an easy one. The coach must teach the student the principles of good speaking as well as the ever-changing theory of debate. And, in many circumstances the coach is required to do this teaching in an extracurricular context that exists in addition to the regular teacher's normal teaching load. Further, the teaching of some topics in the debate curriculum must be highly individualized. Indeed, the lecture method which may be quite satisfactory for teaching inherency or history hardly works for developing each student's best level of voice projection or speaking posture. To make matters worse, the debate topic changes each year. Thus, the coach must annually

be exploring a new area of social concern, requiring the coach to do a certain amount of basic, topic-specific reading.

Fortunately, as we well know, one can cope. Many of the topics which the coach must teach to novice debaters do not have to be repeated in later years. Mercifully, one does not have to start each of a debater's four years of debate by teaching the principles of the comparative advantage case. However, if the foregoing is true, what does the debate coach do after all of the debate theory is taught and after all of the practice speeches are given for the purpose of reinforcing the principles of good public communication? My answer is that the coach must be an active participant in the development of the debaters' evidence and arguments.

At the novice level, the coach must clearly be concerned with these issues. Coaching sessions must be devoted to teaching the novice how to find his/her way around a library and how to construct complete arguments. In many circumstances, the coach is the role model who will guide the students in developing a perception of sound evidence and research. If the coach, or a coach-surrogate/varsity debater, is not actively a part of a novice's early research outings (especially to university libraries), many students who could gain much from debate will give up in frustration. For example, even if the novice possesses a mastery of the READER'S GUIDE TO PERIODICAL LITERATURE, many other valuable references may be overlooked due to lack of experience. The coach's presence and participation in helping the novice find useful, high quality evidence is certainly a legitimate activity.

Further, from a practical standpoint, being present when debaters, be they novice or advanced, are finding evidence creates the best opportunities for teaching such issues as evidence context, research methodology, and secondary sources. Thus, the coach's role in developing evidence for novice students is educationally well-founded.

In working with advanced debaters, the coach's role in developing evidence for them is different but nevertheless important. Advanced debaters frequently attempt to explore the more complex, and sometimes removed from the real world, issues of a given debate topic. In many cases the coach is the best resource person for the debater to turn to in getting the maximum from a given library research effort. Further, as the coach teaches advancing debaters to use more sophisticated reference materials, say the DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS, the coach promotes research skills that will serve the debater far beyond his/her years in debate. Topics such as research methodology are also the reason that the coach must be involved in some of the research trips of even advanced debaters. The coach's maturity and years of academic experience can provide a valuable resource to the advanced debater as s/he attempts to extract the best empirical evidence. Finally, the issue of evidence context can be best handled when the coach is able to have the debater put the material directly in front of him/her. The coach, who is likely to have a lower level of self-interest in finding a "card" to prove that black is white, can help the debater develop ethics about evidence

that again can serve the debater outside of the debate world. Thus, the advanced status of a debater does not eliminate the coach's responsibility to be involved in the development of evidence for the student.

Growing out of the coach's involvement in developing evidence comes the coach's role in developing arguments for the student. The coach is the first audience to which a debater can turn for evaluation, and (hopefully by training or experience) the coach holds the qualifications to correct unsound arguments. Should the coach take the posture that no comments on argument structure, evidence use, or logic are permissible, then the debater is left to fellow team members or the ballot from the competitive round for feedback. Such a posture is an abdication of an important educational responsibility. As long as the coach retains an attitude of first audience for the debater's attempts at constructing strong arguments, the coach performs a valid educational function. Clearly, such an attitude is necessary because it is not the role of the coach to write arguments or to do research for his/her debaters. Were this the coach's role, then education would be more honestly served by establishing a debate circuit for teachers who were so inclined. Students could then be invited as an audience to root for their favorites. In short, most coaches, I think, eventually realize that they cannot write all of their debaters' arguments, do all of their debaters' evidence gathering, or they get so frustrated that they soon leave coaching. The valid approach is to develop the student's critical faculties by serving as a first audience to

arguments. With novices, the coach will obviously have to invest more time than with experienced debaters because few novices come to the coach with a clear, organized approach to taking a position. With advanced debaters the coach may simply need to be available as a first audience for arguments that are troublesome develop. Also, in the course of practice speeches and debates, the coach has the duty to call the debater's attention to poorly developed arguments or less than the best evidence. In this fashion, standards for sound argumentation are advanced and the students begin to generalize the ability to construct one sound argument into the ability to make sound arguments.

However, without the coach's involvement, this generalization may never occur. How, for example, could a debater get good feedback from a fellow team member if that team member had been developed under the coaching philosophy that refrains from having a role in developing evidence and arguments? As for the ballot as a teaching tool, it offers only limited hope for sound education. While many judges are fair-minded and conscientious, many areas of our nation do not have the ready pool of judges with argumentation backgrounds who can offer helpful critiques of given arguments or evidence. And if the pool is composed of educators who reject their role in the development of good evidence and arguments, how could the student be corrected. Finally, given the number of arguments and issues in a contemporary high school debate round, poor arguments can survive an entire season without being criti-

cized (if the quality of some of the late season rounds I have heard are any indication) even by opponents who are most likely to be looking for flaws. Undoubtedly, the coach is the first, and perhaps best, assurance that debaters will develop sound arguments.

While the role of the contemporary high school debate coach seems to offer endless, and sometimes thankless, work, we as debate educators cannot abdicate our responsibility for developing evidence and arguments. While the trips to the library or the long skull sessions necessary to work the flaws out of an argument may seem to be one task too many, we as coaches should see these efforts as some of the most educationally important work that we do. The alternatives, after all, are not very attractive. While to do the research for the students or to write their arguments for them may serve as a limited modelling form of education and seem more efficient, it ultimately deprives the students of possessing any of the joy of achievement. We can be sure that they will know that their success is only a reflection of their coach's debate ability; they will probably feel little better than puppets. At the other end of the scale, students who debate for a coach who shuns the role of developing evidence and arguments for students will have a far more frustrating experience than they deserve to have. In all likelihood, their education will be diminished by their coach's refusal to provide an important facet of their debate education. Most assuredly, the only sound way for debaters to reach the highest levels of ability in selecting the best evidence or in advancing the best argu-

ments is for them to be constantly challenged to correct the flaws in what they bring to us, their coaches.